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ABSTRACT

The project described in this report used action research to study the involvement of teachers in the change process at a suburban elementary school. The project used study groups as a professional development strategy that fosters educational reform efforts. All 28 teachers on the school's staff signed up for a group. Teachers appreciated the opportunity to learn more about a topic of their own choosing, to work with colleagues with similar interests, and to have a framework for testing and implementing new ideas. Using data from interviews with teachers before and after the first year of implementation, three study group profiles--focused on special needs children, related arts, and incorporating multiple intelligence theory--were developed to describe the scope and type of professional development activities teachers chose as a result of their participation in study groups. Analysis of the data revealed that study group activities encouraged teachers to design lessons cooperatively and to develop resource materials for themselves and other teachers, and provided an atmosphere of collaboration and experimentation. Also, teachers felt that the study groups were a good strategy for bringing about school change. Project findings suggested that study groups as a professional development activity can foster the implementation of school improvement goals and provide a structure that supports teachers as they work toward meaningful change in teaching practice. (Contains 19 references.) (ND)

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ED 402 286

Launching School Change Through Teacher Study Groups: An Action Research Project

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For the past fifteen years, calls for school reform have been the cry of legislators, business executives, governors, parents, community members, and school administrators themselves. These challenges for reform have been answered with a variety of strategies: national standards for curriculum content and professional teaching certification; statewide mandates for accountability ranging from tightened standards for teacher preparation to proficiency testing of students at various grade levels; and local efforts to change the organizational and decision-making patterns of schools, such as site-based management and strategic planning. Where these reforms often fall short is in the involvement of those closest to meaningful change, the classroom teachers. Reform efforts that merely introduce new practices are "flawed because they ignore an important source of knowledge (what practitioners know), do nothing to enable practitioners to build on these insights, and view practitioners as docile and compliant" (Gitlin, 1990). As a result of ignoring the important role of teachers in the reform process, many teachers may become openly resistant to change efforts.

Educators are faced with the practical problem, "How should we go about engaging teachers in school reform in ways that will create significant and worthwhile change in classroom practice?" The purpose of this project is to apply the process of action research in studying the effects of efforts to involve teachers in the change process at a suburban elementary school. The change process began when a planning team engaged in reading, reflection, and team-building, and established several goals for school improvement. To foster progress toward these goals and create support for change in teaching practice, teacher study groups were formed as a vehicle for engaging teachers in reflection and collaboration. The action research cycle is being used throughout the school improvement

efforts to investigate the effects of the study groups on teachers' feelings and expectations about their professional development in a climate of educational reform.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the findings of two action research data collection points: immediately following the initial formation of the study groups and the conclusion of the first year of study group work. The first section of the paper outlines a theoretical framework for study groups as a professional development strategy that fosters educational reform efforts. The methodology section explains how the phases of action research have thus far been applied to the project. In the final two sections, findings are discussed and recommendations are made for the future of the project.

Theoretical Framework

Professional development strategies that support meaningful and worthwhile change in teaching practice are essential to the success of school reform efforts. Most current school improvement efforts can best be described as systemic reform–aligning all aspects of the educational system to focus on student learning and achievement. Systemic reform is characterized by themes such as authentic learning–teaching for meaningful learning rather than merely conveying information and declarative knowledge; success for all students; new roles for teachers as facilitators of learning in the classroom as well as participants in the decision-making of schools; and the development of learning communities of teachers, students, and parents that support the difficult quest for more powerful educational content (Newmann, 1993).

In light of the focus on improving student achievement and meaningful learning, teachers and their classroom practice play an essential role in school reform. Authentic learning suggests the need to move beyond memorizing factual information to fostering students' abilities to construct, interpret, and apply knowledge to real world problems. "The teacher's job is no longer to 'cover the curriculum' but to enable diverse learners to construct their own knowledge and to develop their talents in effective and powerful ways"

(Richardson, 1990). In addition, schools must build a sense of community in which teachers are able to plan collaboratively and take responsibility for making key decisions about school policies that affect their work in the classroom. "Meaningful change will occur only when those who work in and with schools have the opportunity to develop the attitudes, beliefs, knowledge, and skills necessary to translate these new ideas and concepts into meaningful and specific plans for change and to incorporate them into their day-to-day routines" (Hixson & Tinzmann, 1990, p. 1).

There is little disagreement that the professional development of teachers is fundamental to achieving educational change. "Every modern proposal to reform, restructure, or transform schools emphasizes professional development as a primary vehicle in efforts to bring about needed change" (Guskey, 1996, p. 1). There are, however, many forms of professional development that suggest varying approaches to bringing about change in teaching practice. What types of professional development strategies might best support the kinds of significant and worthwhile change in teaching practice necessary for systemic reform?

Literature about teacher change has traditionally focused on whether or not teachers have implemented a specific initiative as anticipated. McLaughlin (1987) found that the lack of success with various innovations was frequently attributed to teachers' resistance to change. Several factors might contribute to this resistance. Change may not be realized because of the structure of the school organization. When school conditions such as collegiality and an accepting atmosphere of experimentation do not exist, change is less likely to occur (Little, 1987). Even ways in which school administrators handle the change process can have an impact on teachers' ability to make significant change in teaching practice (Huberman & Miles, 1984). Attempts to change school structure, however, are rarely enough to foster change in either teaching practice or student learning (Elmore, 1992). Structural changes such as flexible grouping practices may be a step toward bringing about change in practice, but such changes do not guarantee that teachers will

begin using strategies that promote greater conceptual understanding of content and thus an improved learning environment.

The individual beliefs, knowledge, attitudes, and perceptions of teachers are another perhaps more significant factor in inhibiting or promoting meaningful change in teaching practice. For instance, a change or innovation seen as appropriate by researchers, outside consultants, or administrators may not fit teachers' practical theories of what they should be doing in the classroom. When someone outside the classroom decides what the change will be, there is less likely to be any change (Richardson, 1990).

Essentially, teachers change and grow on the basis of who they are and what experiences they have had. Teaching is an intensely personal activity (Bryk, 1988) and is thus influenced by the teachers' perceptions and beliefs about themselves as learners and teachers. In addition, teaching experience effects teachers' ability to change and grow. Practical theories are gained through experience and are reconstructed or reinforced on the basis of additional experience. As Richardson (1990) concludes, the improvement of teaching requires acknowledging, building upon, and promoting reflection on teachers' experiences.

Altrichter, Posch, and Somekh (1993) distinguish between varying approaches to change in teaching practice. The technical rational view of change assumes that there are basic solutions to practical problems of teaching, that these solutions can be developed outside practical situations, and that the solutions can be conveyed to teachers through training, administrative policies or directives, or publications. This view of change manifests itself in the traditional research, development, dissemination model of professional development–researchers produce the theoretical background, this research is applied to solve a practical problem in general terms, and the results are disseminated to teachers in a manner of telling them the "right way" to teach. Smylie and Conyers (1991) explain the importance of moving from this traditional view of professional development to

one that begins from the base of teachers' competencies and builds from them, promoting self-reflection and growth.

This alternate view of change, as described by Altrichter, Posch, and Somekh (1993), is a reflective view of professionalism. The reflective rationality recognizes the complexity and specificity of teaching. Solutions to practical problems must be developed in the context in which problems arise and are not necessarily generalizable to other situations. In this view of change, the teacher is the crucial and determining element of the change process. Altrichter, Posch, and Somekh (1993) conclude in agreement with Richardson (1990)–educational reform and innovations have little chance of success unless they involve teachers in exploring the implications of the change for their own educational setting, and finding out how to make any necessary alterations to the routines of their practice. What is needed is teacher-focused professional development that supports collegial discourse and inquiry (Darling-Hammond, 1993).

Teacher study groups represent one type of professional development strategy that could support change in teaching practice. Such groups consist of four to six teachers (and sometimes parents and/or school administrators) who meet informally to learn, share, and investigate new methods of teaching. Study groups may engage in a wide variety of activities from developing curriculum to implementing school improvement goals (Murphy, 1992). Members of study groups may also work together to conduct action research projects about a wide variety of issues related to teaching practice. Regardless of the specific activities of the study groups, the goal is to learn from each other.

There are several reasons why study groups could prove to be an essential strategy in fostering school improvement. First, this strategy recognizes teachers as a source of knowledge about their teaching practice, encouraging reflection rather than replication. Traditional approaches to professional development have assumed expertise about teaching and learning comes from those not involved in the day-to-day world of teaching, but rather with consultants, academic researchers, and theorists. Such an assumption ignores the

complexity and contextual nature of teaching. Educational reform and innovations have little chance of success unless they involve teachers in exploring the implications of change for their own educational setting, and encourage necessary alternations to the routines of their practice (Richardson, 1990). Study groups build on teachers' present knowledge and skills, representing an important shift from past practice in professional development, which often assumed a "fix it" approach (Smylie & Conyers, 1991). Study groups are based on the idea that teachers are more likely to improve their teaching and modify their behavior if they are involved in reflecting on their own practices. Munger (1992), for example, reports that the use of teacher study groups had a positive influence on teachers' implementation of cooperative learning.

Secondly, study groups afford teachers an active role in their own professional development. Traditional models of staff development typically neglect the role of the teacher in bringing about change in teaching practice, but if significant change is to occur in schools, teachers must have ownership. In a study group, teachers determine their own goals and select the activities that will result in the achievement of those goals. Teachers' ability to direct their own professional development is supported by research on teacher thinking, which suggests that "teachers are more active than passive, more ready to learn than resistant, more wise and knowledgeable than deficient, and more diverse and unique than they are homogeneous" (Clark, 1992, pp. 76-77).

Finally, study groups play an important role in building learning communities and creating environments for school reform and meaningful change. Since teaching is often an isolated activity, there is a need to overcome feelings of separateness in order to provide encouragement and support for change (Maeroff, 1993). Using study groups places teachers in collaborative roles that support change and risk-taking as teachers try new strategies and critique present practice. In study groups, teachers function as learners and problem solvers, promoting lifelong learning and modeling learning for students. Building

such learning communities is an essential part of systemic school reform (Newmann, 1993).

Methodology

The focus for this project was to apply the action research process to the question, "What professional development strategies could be used to create an environment that supports teachers' significant and worthwhile change in teaching practice?" Kemmis and McTaggert (1988) describe action research as a systematic process of inquiry involving several steps or phases. The process begins with planning–identifying a question, concern, or problem about one's practice. This phase includes gathering information to clarify the problem through such activities as observing, interviewing others involved, reading literature, and reflective journaling. The next two phases of the process represent taking action and monitoring the results of the action related to the researchable problem. The final phase of the process is reflection, involving reviewing the results of the action taken to make recommendations for future practice. By critically examining the results of the initial action taken and creating a new plan, the act-observe-reflect cycle begins again, at a higher level of awareness about the problem.

Because of its cyclical nature, action research lends itself well to the ongoing challenge of school improvement. The process provides an appropriate way for practitioners involved in school reform efforts to continue to research and refine reform strategies. Implementation efforts in this particular project will continue for some time and will no doubt involve many different actions and the need to experiment, reflect, and possibly redirect efforts. What follows in this section of the paper is a description of how the phases of action research are being applied in this particular context of school change.

Phase I: Problem Identification

Hill Street School serves approximately 350 students in kindergarten through sixth grade with a staff of 28 teachers. The school is located in a midwestern suburban community with a middle to upper income range. In 1992, a school improvement process was initiated. A planning team of eight teachers, twelve parents and community members, the building principal, and a central office administrator engaged in a two-year process of reading, reflection, team-building, and goal-setting. This work culminated in the development of several goals for school improvement at Hill Street. One of these goals is to create classroom learning environments that are more student-directed and that foster lifelong learning skills. This goal represents the need for teachers to examine present teaching practices and critique methods that will help students take responsibility for their own learning. As the planning team prepared to develop an action plan to achieve the goal of more learner-directed classroom environments, several questions emerged:

- What actions can the team take to help the teachers and parents take ownership of the implementation of this goal?
- What actions can the team take to put teachers and parents "in the driver seat" with regard to learning about learner-directed classrooms and testing possible strategies to achieve that goal?
- What actions are most likely to build on teachers' and parents' expertise and knowledge, while allowing them to test new ideas and theories about creating learner-directed classrooms?
- What actions can the team take to help teachers and parents be reflective about teaching practices and learning, particularly about those practices related to learner-directed classrooms?

Phase II: Plan of Action

The heart of the school improvement team action plan included the use of study groups to foster the implementation of the school improvement goal related to improved learning environments. In the spring of 1995, teachers were invited to form study groups of four to six teachers and no more than two parents. Participation was voluntary and teachers could choose their study group members and a topic for study. The groups were encouraged to meet on a regular basis and could choose a meeting time of their convenience. Groups could apply for professional development credit from the school district or for independent study graduate credit through arrangements with a nearby state university. An after-school meeting was held to introduce teachers to the action research process, which they could use as a focus for group interaction.

In addition, the school improvement team held several special events to support the study groups. A luncheon was held prior to the 1995-96 school year to celebrate the participation of parents and teachers and a mid-year sharing session on a teacher work day provided teachers an opportunity to see what other study groups were doing. In order to provide support for dealing with change and to build a sense of community among the teachers, a seminar and follow-up "brown-bag" after school meetings were held focusing on how people view and experience change, and strategies for dealing with those feelings. Though this seminar and follow-up meetings were not directly connected to the study groups, it was hoped that they would build a sense of community and willingness to face change.

Phase III: Data Collection

The first point of data collection undertaken by the school improvement team occurred in the spring of 1995, immediately after teachers signed up for the study group. To determine the effects of the initial actions concerning the study groups, two methods of data collection were used. First, study group sign-up forms were compiled to determine

the number of teachers interested, their topics of interest, and how those interests might be connected to the school improvement goal of an improved learning environment. Secondly, personal interviews were used to determine teachers' initial feelings about the study groups, how the study groups fit in with their ideas about effective professional development, and their goals and expectations about what they felt they would learn from their involvement in a study group. Seven teachers were selected for interviews, representing several different study groups, a variety of grade levels, and related arts teachers as well as classroom teachers. Of these seven teachers, two had over twenty years experience and the others had between six and eleven years experience. Three had Masters' degrees, and another two were actively working toward an advanced degree. Though a set of questions was developed to guide the interviews, an informal and conversational tone was maintained during the interviews. All interviews were tape recorded, transcribed, and reviewed. Responses were analyzed by grouping them according to several themes: types of professional development activities that foster growth and change, the role of study groups in fostering change, and implications and suggestions for the further implementation of the study group project.

The second point of data collection occurred in the summer of 1996 after the first full year of study group implementation. Follow-up interviews were conducted with teachers interviewed the previous year. Responses were analyzed with several purposes in mind: to profile study group activities, to identify ways in which study groups fostered teachers' professional development and school improvement, and to identify recommendations to enhance further implementation. The analysis of the data collection at both points led to the next phase of the action research cycle, reflection, and the resulting findings and recommendations as reported in the next section of this paper.

Findings

Two sets of findings from this action research project are reported in this section: the findings from the first point of data collection which analyzed information about the formation of the study groups and initial teacher interviews, and the findings from the follow-up interviews conducted after the first year of implementation.

Findings From the First Data Collection Point

Following an invitation to form study groups, all the teachers on the Hill Street staff signed up for a group, resulting in a total of eight study groups ranging in size from two teachers to four teachers. The school improvement team and the principal of the school were surprised at this level of participation. Prior to the study group sign-up it was felt that some of the staff would be interested, but there would also be some teachers who would not participate. When all the teachers signed up it raised the question, "Did the teachers feel in some way pressured to sign up, even though participation was voluntary?" To further investigate this issue, teachers were asked to comment about this level of involvement during the personal interviews conducted for the project.

Three of the seven teachers interviewed suggested that the teachers might have felt some pressure to sign up, but that it was unlikely that such pressure would be the most significant factor in the decision. As one of the teachers explained, "I think people felt compelled to sign-up rather than pressured, because there has been such enthusiasm on the part of several teachers about the study groups. Also, we have a small staff. People just feel that they should participate and be supportive." Another teacher commented on the representative of the school improvement team who first introduced the concept of study groups to the staff. "Kathy was a good spokesperson to introduce the idea. She is a teacher who thinks and reflects before she acts. She doesn't jump into something just because everyone else is doing it. Her enthusiasm spread among the staff."

Several teachers noted other significant reasons for the enthusiastic response. First, teachers were able to choose their own topics. Many of the staff were already involved in taking university course work or implementing new programs. The study groups provided an organized framework for trying out new ideas. Secondly, the teachers were able to choose with whom they would like to work. Those interviewed felt that the staff appreciated being able to work with other teachers who have common interests. One teacher commented on the composition of the study groups. "It was interesting to see that most teachers did not sign up to be in a group that represented those teachers they usually team with. It may shake up who eats lunch with who!"

The number of teachers signing up for study groups, then, represented more than merely a feeling of being pressured or compelled. Teachers seemed to be appreciative of the opportunity to learn more about a topic of their own choosing, to be able to work with colleagues with similar interests, and to have a framework for testing and implementing new ideas. Their interest in a wide variety of new ideas was indicated in the topics selected by the various study groups. The topics chosen by each of the study groups are listed below. It should be noted that they are recorded here in the exact words used by the teachers on their sign-up forms.

- Meeting the needs of students with special learning needs
- Teaching to multiple intelligences
- Integrating math and literature into thematic units through learning centers
- Using alternative assessment/student-led conferences
- Mental health/child behavior
- Integrating instructional units with related arts (two groups)
- Piloting an everyday math program

Each of these topics held some relationship to the school improvement goal of more student-directed classroom environments that meet the needs of all learners. Again, the researcher asked questions during the personal interviews to explore reasons why study

groups selected their specific topics. Many were using the study groups as a structure for implementing ideas learned at conferences or during university course work. Other teachers chose the topic because it related to the implementation of a new program, such as everyday math. Of those teachers interviewed, all teachers selected a topic that reflected something they wanted to try out in classroom practice. As one teacher notes, "I joined a study group because I wanted my classroom to become a lab for trying out new ideas." This finding supports one of the key reasons why study groups were chosen as a strategy for fostering school change. They provide the framework for teachers examining new classroom practices, implementing new strategies, and making meaningful changes after reflecting on their findings.

The findings from the initial interviews with seven teachers were analyzed according to two themes: types of professional development activities that foster growth and change and the role of study groups in fostering change.

Types of professional development activities that foster growth and change. All seven teachers indicated the importance of a variety of activities in fostering professional growth. Most teachers were involved in a number of activities, some that they initiated on their own, such as attendance at special conferences or university course work. Other activities included district-sponsored inservice or curriculum and program development. A second grade teacher explained her view of meaningful professional development activities as being a series of strategies linked together with synthesis and reflection.

> I like to begin by researching and reading for myself first. Then I go to a conference or inservice and hear it from a different group of people. If it begins to make sense, the next step is talking to and working with colleagues and being able to start using it in the classroom–seeing how it works. That's how I got into the cooperative learning thing. I started reading, took classes and district inservices. Then I began to realize, 'This is making sense.' I talked to others on the staff and tried it in the classroom. Another staff member and I took a class and shared ideas

and did observations of each other. Now cooperative learning is very much a part of my classroom almost daily. I guess that's the sort of process I go through. I almost have to process it first in my mind and see how it fits in with what I believe and what my philosophy is and what I am doing.

Not only did this teacher's response indicate the importance of a variety of professional development activities, but also the need for teachers to have some control over the sequence and types of activities. Another teacher explained why she feels the study group approach is appropriate in meeting individual professional development needs. "Study groups are a great idea! It's tricky to find a class that is tailored to your needs. Here we are basically creating it. It's not something that is going to be a short duration. It will be ongoing and change a bit as you are going along–somewhat dynamic. If you want to look at something else or look at it in a different way, you can do it."

One of the most important criteria for whether or not the teachers perceived professional development activities as helpful was whether or not they were able to interact with colleagues. Study groups were seen as opportunities to share ideas as well as receive support from others. One teacher explained the importance of collegial interaction in transmitting knowledge about teaching into practice. "My most significant learning experiences have been any time I have taken course work or inservice with a colleague, because you come back to school and you use it and you are able to talk about why it did or did not work. When you do it on your own, you are less likely to try it again if it did not work the first time."

Interaction with colleagues can become an even greater influence on change in teaching practice when the interaction is structured and given direction through a common purpose. One teacher shared her most significant learning experience as when she and another teacher teamed together to write a unit on storytelling. They planned together and consciously reflected and evaluated the experience. The teacher explained, "Curriculum

development projects are important because I interact with colleagues better if we have a joint purpose. Things can be very social if we are not focused on a project."

Finally, the interview data indicated that even though professional development activities are significant factors in bringing about meaningful change in classroom practice they may not be sufficient in and of themselves. The structure of the school has a definite influence on whether or not a teacher feels supported to make changes. One teacher described the importance of a supportive school structure.

> About five or six years into teaching I began to feel unsatisfied with my teaching–that it wasn't the way I wanted it to be. It was very acceptable to use worksheets, basals, and independent learning activities–it was expected and easy. I personally began to get bored with it and felt it couldn't be fun for kids either. They weren't making good connections with things, because everything was so separate from each other. But I wasn't really given permission to change by the school. When we got a new principal, she really encouraged and wanted change and that gave me permission to change and helped me see the need for it.

The role of study groups in fostering change. The teachers interviewed perceived the study groups as important in fostering change for three reasons. First, the study groups gave teachers control over the selection of professional development activities that would most likely bring about change. Teachers expected a wide variety of study group activities including reading current literature, taking graduate course work, planning classroom activities and developing curriculum, and conducting action research. As one teacher described, "The responsibilities we have in a study group are just like what we expect of students in our classroom. You are a self-directed learner. You identify what you want to strengthen about your teaching and work on it. It supports lifelong learning."

Secondly, the teachers perceived the study group as an opportunity to focus on a specific topic of their own choosing. A third grade teacher explains, "Study groups will give us definite time to focus on a goal. I joined the group working on integrating related

arts. This is something I have been trying to work on for years, but now I'll actually have a set time to meet with the related arts teachers and work out something with them." With the opportunity to choose their own topics, teachers also will be able to acknowledge and critique their own practical theories about teaching. One teacher described the importance of an individual teacher's perspective in the change process, "Change won't work in the classroom unless it comes from you. You see something that is going on in your classroom or you feel that you are not satisfied with something. Perhaps you know it could be done better or differently and probably you would be able to help kids better if you did something differently. It must match your whole picture." The study groups could provide opportunities for teachers to focus on such inconsistencies and improve their practice in areas where they see a need for change.

Finally, the teachers felt the study groups would foster change by providing a structure for peer interaction. Though many teachers interact with colleagues on an informal basis, there is rarely time set aside for this purpose, even though it is such an important component for fostering change in teaching practice. "One of the best ways that I learn," noted one teacher, "is when I'm doing something that pertains to my classroom and I'm actually trying it out and I have colleagues that are working on the same thing with me." Another teacher simply states, "I'd be lost without my colleagues and saying, 'What do you think of this? What works for you?'" There was enthusiasm among the teachers interviewed to have time set aside for this type of collegial interaction. Not only did they see themselves benefiting from the study group, but being able to help other study group members as well. Several teachers noted the importance of sharing a variety of ideas and perspectives. As one teacher stated, "You see a broader picture by sharing with others, bouncing ideas, seeing things that others don't. The more people you have, the better the result."

Findings From Follow-Up Interviews

Using information gleaned from the interviews with teachers after the first year of implementation, three study group profiles were developed to describe the scope and types of professional development activities in which teachers engaged as a result of their participation in the study groups.

Profile 1: Two teachers, the reading specialist, the school nurse, and two parents formed a study group around the issue of developing strategies for working with special needs children who have been included in regular classes. A particular focus of the group was providing for ADHD and ADD students. The group began by pooling readings on the subject from a number of resources. One group member had taken a graduate course and the group capitalized on those resources as well as finding others. They read, reflected on readings, and discussed possible courses of action. During their after-school meetings, the group developed a notebook of resources for building staff (including sample letters to doctors and parents about noted special needs concerns), which is now housed in the professional library of the school. In addition they produced a printed flip book of modification strategies for teachers, which the district printed for the entire staff of their school. One group member presented the group's work at a regional professional development conference. The group also applied for and received professional advancement credit through the school district by submitting a proposal, turning in a log of 30 hours of activities, and writing up a report of what they learned. This credit can be used to earn extra salary when moving up a step on the district salary schedule.

Profile 2: A study group was formed by four related arts teachers, two fifth grade teachers, two sixth grade teachers, and a third grade teacher focusing on the integration of related arts through thematic units. Initially the group met once a month after school to read and discuss articles they had found on the subject. They

also capitalized on graduate courses several group members were taking as well as attending conferences related to integration. Working in sub-groups consisting of particular grade levels with the related arts teachers, they planned, conducted and evaluated several thematic units during the school year. A Medieval unit was planned with the sixth grade teachers and was very successful. Students researched reports in the library, performed period music in music class, studied and created Medieval art in art class, and jousted and played Medieval games in physical education class. The unit culminated in a Medieval feast in which students performed or displayed their work. Group members were invited to present this unit at a regional school library conference.

Profile 3: The three teachers assigned to second and third grade multi-age classes this year formed a study group to incorporate multiple intelligences theory. They were joined by a parent and the music teacher. After reading and discussing several books and resources, the team cooperatively designed several learning centers for their classrooms. Realizing the amount of work involved in creating learning centers devoted to specific areas of intelligence, they agreed to divide the work, and each teacher created several centers and shared their work with others in the group. After using the learning centers in the classroom, they evaluated their effectiveness. Though they adjusted their initial goal of creating centers for each area of intelligence for each unit, they did complete about five centers for several major teaching units.

Several themes emerged from the analysis of the teachers' interviews and the profiles of study group activities. First, the study group activities supported the teachers' professional development in a number of ways. The teachers chose a variety of activities–from reading and reflection to cooperatively designing lessons to developing resource materials for themselves and other teachers. The teachers accessed information from professional journals, books, university course materials, conferences, and technological

sources. It is difficult to imagine that the school improvement team could have provided this variety and depth without the teachers directing it themselves. As one teacher explained in her interview, "The most worthwhile thing about our work was the wealth of information we collected . . . finding new information I didn't know. It was a group effort and we couldn't have done it alone."

The study groups also enhanced the teachers' professional development by providing an atmosphere of collaboration and experimentation. "It was collaboration–a sharing of ideas, just like we expect kids to do in the classroom," one teacher described. "The actual planning and working together established relationships." As the study groups worked together the sense of teamwork gave them confidence to attempt classroom practices they would not have tried without support. "The key to our success with the centers was being on a team," stated a teacher from the multiple intelligences group. "There was support for risk-taking. There would have been apprehension with trying something new, otherwise. And the time element . . . so many kids with so many needs . . . we couldn't have done it on our own." Study groups were not without conflict. One teacher shared her experience with a group disagreement and explained how the group talked through the problem. In the end, she felt working through the conflict had strengthened the group. Another teacher explained that even though her group worked well together, they seem to be at "different points on a continuum" with regard to their philosophies about integration, the study focus of the group. "We weren't really in disagreement, but at different points." Perhaps her observations indicate a deeper level of reflection among group members and thus, evidence of philosophical differences which do not readily appear without meaningful group interaction.

A second theme that emerged from the interviews was the role of the study groups in supporting the school improvement process. The teachers generally felt that the study groups were a good strategy for bringing about school change, particularly since "change needs to come at the individual classroom level." Though one teacher in particular

expressed her frustration with a lack of support for school change from the district level, she felt that study groups have awakened people to change and helped them see that change is hard. As another teacher described, "Our study group work set a tone for school improvement, an atmosphere of concentration. We were working together regardless of our interest in the process (of school improvement). We weren't singling out anybody or stifling those who wanted to take risks. The possibilities were open." Fostering an atmosphere of concentration and experimentation was what the school improvement team hoped to achieve through study group implementation.

A final theme that emerged from the follow-up interviews was the need to provide time for study groups to meet. The lack of meeting time was a common constraint identified by the teachers in the study groups. Very few met during the school day, frequently convening after school on their own time. Though incentives offered for professional advancement credit or graduate course credit somewhat rewarded teachers for time spent, many still viewed the study group activity as an "extra" rather than a part of their routine responsibilities as teachers. One teacher in particular noted the importance of receiving such credit. She did not feel teachers would participate merely to grow as a teacher, but needed the incentive. Hence, there is still the attitude that professional development is "above and beyond" regular duties as a teacher rather than being part of everyday expectations. Making time for study group activities during the school day–by covering classes, regrouping students, or designating staff meeting or inservice time–could begin to shift these attitudes.

Recommendations for Future School Improvement Efforts

Data collected at both points indicates the initial stages of the study group project have gone smoothly. A greater challenge lies in encouraging substantive group interaction and sustaining the groups over time to foster significant change in teaching practice. As the school improvement team continues implementation of the study groups, it will be

important to provide enough structure and support to sustain the momentum and involvement of the teachers. The findings from this project indicate that teachers will need support for study group activities, particularly time to meet. Though most study groups have decided to continue their work for a second year, there may be a point at which teachers will want to regroup–initiating new groups around new topics, or continuing present topics with different groups. Though one mid-year session was held in which each study group shared their findings with other study groups, more of this sharing probably needs to occur so that the whole staff can benefit from the actions of the individual groups. Each study group also presented briefly at PTA meetings throughout the year. Additional activities, however, could be planned so that study groups could share findings with staff and parents on a regular basis.

The findings of this project support the idea that study groups are a professional development activity that can foster the implementation of school improvement goals. Thus far, the study groups have provided the opportunity for teachers to interact with colleagues who have common interests for classroom change and improvement, have provided a structure for focusing on school improvement goals as they relate to specific classroom settings, and have allowed teachers some control over the kinds of professional development activities that will most likely help them make changes in classroom practice. As one teacher summarized, "I definitely see the study group idea fulfilling the vision and goals of the school improvement process. Though we still have a long way for us to go, I don't think it will ever stop. We need to realize that change takes time and give people time and room to grow."

The findings of this action research project have long-term implications for the school improvement efforts at this school, as well as for school improvement efforts in a greater context. To bring about school change, teachers must be actively engaged in trying out new ideas in a purposeful way. They benefit greatly from peer interaction and reflection with colleagues. The structure and atmosphere of the school setting must be

supportive for this type of interaction to take place. Study groups can provide a structure that supports teachers as they work toward meaningful change in teaching practice.

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